



Office of Civil Rights

Yesler Building, 400 Yesler Way, Room 260
Seattle, Washington 98104-2683 MS: YES-ES-0260
206-296-7592 Voice TTY Relay: 711 206-296-4329 Fax
civil-rights.OCR@kingcounty.gov
kcweb.metrokc.gov/dias/ocre/discompl.doc

DISABILITY LANGUAGE AND ETIQUETTE

LANGUAGE

Language is continually evolving, including language related to people with disabilities. Staying current is important, not to show “politically correctness” but to communicate effectively and with respect. What you say and write may enhance the dignity of people with disabilities or may inadvertently reflect stereotypes and negative attitudes.

Some words and phrases don’t recognize the broad range of capabilities of people with disabilities. They don’t need or want to be pitied, nor should they be labeled “courageous” or “special” because they accomplish daily activities or work. Also, people are sometimes concerned that they will say the wrong thing, so they say nothing at all – further segregating people with disabilities.

“Person First” Refer to the person first, not the disability. For example, “the person who uses a wheelchair” or “the person with arthritis” is preferred over “the wheelchair person” or “the arthritic”, which define the person as a disability rather than as one aspect of his/her life. This general rule may be different within some communities, such as those who are blind or Deaf. Some individuals self-identify their group as “the blind” or “the Deaf.” Mention a disability only when it is relevant to the discussion.

“Handicap” and “disability” are not synonyms! Disability is a generic term for a condition which may affect a person’s mobility, hearing, vision, speech, or cognitive function (paraplegia, deafness, AIDS). Handicap describes an environmental or attitudinal barrier (such as no ramps or elevator, information not available in Braille, negative stereotypes).

ETIQUETTE

If you have had little interaction with people who have disabilities, you may feel uncertain about what to do. Here are a few tips.

Shaking hands is usually welcome. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting. You may want to take the cue from the person with a disability. (Someone who is blind may not see your extended hand – wait to see if she extends hers.)

When talking with a person who has a disability, look at and speak directly to that person rather than to a companion, aide, or sign language interpreter.

Common words and phrases are okay to use. For example, it’s fine to say “see you later” to a blind person, or “Want to go for a walk?” to a wheelchair user.

Want more information? Contact the OCR Disability Compliance Specialist.

**WHEN REFERRING TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES,
CHOOSE WORDS THAT REFLECT DIGNITY AND RESPECT, SUCH AS:**

INAPPROPRIATE LANGUAGE	APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE
the disabled	people with disabilities, the disability community <i>(disabled, an adjective, must be accompanied by a noun)</i>
the blind, the deaf	the blind community, the Deaf community
crippled, suffers from, afflicted with, stricken with, victim of, invalid	has a disability, is a person with a disability, is physically disabled, walks with a cane, uses leg braces
normal person, healthy, whole	non-disabled, able-bodied, person without disabilities
impaired, impairment	disabled, has a disability
handicap parking, disabled parking	accessible parking, disability parking
wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair person	wheelchair user, person who uses a wheelchair
paraplegic, quadriplegic	man with paraplegia, woman who is paralyzed, person with spinal cord injury
hearing impaired, hearing impairment	deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened
visually impaired, visual impairment	low vision, partially sighted, blind
dumb, mute	person who does not speak, has difficulty speaking, uses synthetic speech, is non-vocal, is non-verbal
stutterer, tongue-tied	person with a speech or communication disability
CP victim, spastic	person with cerebral palsy
epileptic	person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder
fit, attack	seizure, epileptic episode or event
crazy, insane, nuts, psycho	person with mental illness, person living with mental illness
retard, mentally defective, moron, imbecile, Down's person, mongoloid	person with an intellectual, cognitive, or developmental disability
slow learner, retarded, ADHD person	has a learning disability, person with specific learning disability, person with ADHD
dwarf, midget	person of small stature, short stature; little person
birth defect	congenital disability, disabled from birth
post-polio person, suffered from polio	person who had polio, person with post polio syndrome, polio survivor
homebound	stay-at-home, has difficulty getting out